

# KAREN PELLETIER INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: Karen Pelletier  
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CT: We are at Karen's Barbershop in Georgetown, Massachusetts. It's August 21<sup>st</sup> at 10:57am. Please state your full name, your profession and the number of years you've been doing hair.

KP: My name is Karen Pelletier. I've been a barber for twenty-nine years. I was a hairdresser prior to that for about ten years. I didn't practice it all the time. I got discouraged being in cosmetology so I deviated to other jobs such as bartending, waitressing, cleaning people's houses [laughing], things I could do to stay home with my kids and not have to work full-time.

CT: What age did you start cosmetology school?

KP: I was twenty-one years old. It was 1976-77. I went to college to study Business Administration. I moved from my hometown which was Quincy to Salem, Mass [Massachusetts], I was in an Economics class and there was a lot of things about the business part of administration that I didn't like, but I was having a great time in college. I quit college but I still lived in Salem with my friends and worked part-time at a Stop & Shop. My parents decided to lure me back home and they got me a substitute teaching job at a high school with an aunt that was the Principle. I was substitute teaching algebra to kids that were four years younger than I was. It was really difficult to be the discipliner and get their attention to teach them anything so. They [her parents] were hoping that I would want to be a teacher and go back to college and finish my degree and teach but I didn't. I ended up that summer, just going to hairdressing school because I wanted to do something...

CT: Did you know anybody who had been...?

KP: No, I never did, and that was the funny part, I have four sisters and in those days you always set each other's hair in rollers before you went to bed at night. My sisters would be doing my grandmother's and my Mom's [hair] and I was always totally out of that, I never ever wanted to participate in any of that [laughing] so for me to go to hairdressing school was a surprise to everybody because I never had any inkling to try to help them [with their hair] at all.

CT: So how was that? Did you feel like you were in the right place? Did you question it?

KP: No, I didn't, it was a short span of time, seven months going full-time, get through it and then get a job. I fell in love with my husband in Salem and I think I was just focused on accomplishing something so I could marry him and live happily ever after doing something and it didn't necessarily have to be a college degree in my mind. But I worked in a shop in Cambridge on Mass [Massachusetts] Ave. We nicknamed it the "little old blue-haired ladies shop."

CT: What was the name of it?

KP: Carol's Beauty Shop on Mass Ave. it was right on the Cambridge/Arlington [subway] line. Basically every place I worked as a hairdresser, I ended up being the person who did the shampooing and the side work of the hair part. When I got married my husband worked in construction and a lot of his friends found out that I cut hair so they would come and have a beer in our kitchen and I would cut their hair and that's when I realized that this is what I really like — is cutting men's hair. And at the time, it was in the '70s when men wanted longer hairstyles and the barbers weren't able to do anything they hadn't trained themselves to do anything other than clipper work, they couldn't actually pick hair up in their hands and cut it, they had no concept of how that could be done, so a lot of guys would come into the hairdresser shop that I worked in and I would cut their hair but they were miserable, they hated being around the smell of the perm, the actual application of hair color to women, having a man visualize that...I know that I go to the hairdresser's now and it's a neutral gendered shop and I hate having a guy see me with foils in my hair [laughing]. It still happens but as a person that was doing it, I really wanted to just have it be a comfortable place for them to come and get their hair cut. That's when I started thinking that I would like to own my own business and be able to do that but in hindsight I thought before I'd lock myself into my own business I really should go back and go to barber school. My son was about three years old at the time and a friend of mine offered to do daycare for him really cheaply. So I traveled down to Lynn and went to New England Massachusetts School of Barbering and I had to do another thousand hours all over again, even though I had done a thousand hours of cosmetology, they didn't recognize any of it.

CT: How was it different?

KP: The sterilization and the diseases of the scalp and the skin and all of that were all the same but there wasn't any type of training for setting hair or finger waves. They touched upon perms but they really didn't get into a lot of chemical [treatments]. If you wanted to know about that you were going to have to advance yourself beyond what the state of Massachusetts required you to be.

CT: What about all the cuts that you learned?

KP: They just gave you the basics. I had already been cutting men's hair so I kind of just skimmed through it but my instructors and the owner of the school recognized that I had the skill already so they didn't focus too much on me as far as teaching me anything, it was really just a process that I went through to get the paperwork that I needed. When I graduated from there, then I tried to find a shop that I could work in. It was a barbershop, a gentleman up the street, Gino's Barbershop had been in town longer than I have. I got all dressed up and went in to apply for a job there

thinking it's in the same town and I could go work there and be right down the street and I just wished that I could have made myself invisible and turned around and walked out because it was real military style but he was really very, very nice and suggested that I go to his buddy's shop in New Hampshire because he hired women but Gino was just a one-man show and he wasn't looking to hire anybody. It's kind of funny because years later I opened this [barbershop] which was a block away from him. I went and introduced myself to him again and he was awesome, he had great advice for me as to what my hours should be and [that] my priorities should be my family and not my business and not make that mistake because people will accommodate what you set as hours and then go home to their families so that you can go home to yours too. Being a mom and trying to start my own business that was really important to me.

CT: Did he remember you?

KP: I don't know if he did or not. I don't think he did. I think that he was very encouraging and he said there's plenty of business for both of us and he wasn't competitive at all about it and wished me really good luck.

CT: That's great. So what do you think is the best part of the job?

KP: The people. I just love watching the kids grow. After twenty-three years I have customers that came to me as kids that are now bringing their kids, just that whole circle of life is really nice. I love it. I love it.

CT: What's the worst part of the job?

KP: Having to work [laughing]. It would just be nice to not have to work, at this point. I'm fifty-six years old. But there really isn't any negative in my life as far as my work is concerned. It's just work in general, I'm sure everyone feels the same way right?

CT: Yeah. I wanted to ask you about the importance of hair. There was a Yale psychologist who did a study. She had a computerized image of a woman's face and she put five different hairstyles on that woman's face and interviewed all these people and asked them how wealthy is this woman? How smart is she? And she got wildly different answers based on the hairstyle. Do you think that's applicable to men — the importance of hair, their hairstyle and how well they do in life?

KP: Unfortunately, [it's] not as important because a lot of men are prematurely bald, so they can be wildly successful. They're not...I don't know, that's a hard question to answer with men. I don't think it does play as much of a factor. You can tell the crispness of the haircut, the detail of the haircut to see where they stand. You can have someone who is not that particular about the detail about how their hair looks and still be successful. There's a lot of men...their wives tell them to go get their hair cut. It's not their wish or their need.

CT: They're not preoccupied with it.

KP: Exactly, they are not preoccupied with their hair.

CT: About how many years did it take to build a solid clientele here? Being a female barber did you find that men were leery or not?

KP: That's part of why I named it Karen's Barbershop because I wanted people to automatically know that if you were coming in here you were going to find a woman cutting your hair. It's funny. It's a mixed bag of people whether they prefer a man to cut their hair or a woman to cut their hair. I know my husband, I had been cutting his hair since he was eighteen and he's fifty-six now. He couldn't imagine having a man cut his hair. The day that I opened up I was swamped.

CT: What year did you open up?

KP: January 29, 1990. I took every piece of clutter out of my house and put it in a box and brought it down here thinking, *I'll go through this when I'm bored*. My husband had flowers sent to the shop. I took a cleaning bucket and filled it with water to put the flowers into it because I had no time to put them into a vase or do anything [laughing]. My husband and I put ourselves in debt to renovate the space. It's a rented space but we had to put some money into it to make it look nice. I was supposed to get a job and instead we used a home equity loan.

CT: You were supposed to get another job?

KP: No, my daughter was three and I wanted to stay home with her full-time. She was at the precipice of turning three and my husband did a seasonal job so he gets laid off in the winter. It was the winter so I said, why don't I go and find another haircutting job and you can stay home with Michelle until the spring. I went to shops that I had worked in prior to this and none of them had a chair available for me to be able to work. So I was pretty discouraged coming home and saw the "For Rent" sign on this window and stopped and wrote the number down. I thought what have I got to lose? It's on Main St. and I have a good enough clientele that I could probably pay the rent with. I have styled so many people over the years, I could piecemeal them. People are very loyal. If they find somebody that cut's their hair and they don't have to worry about how it looks, they get out of the shower and they comb it once or not comb it at all and it looks good for the rest of the day, they're glued to you. They don't want to go to anyone else. A lot of them don't even want to sit in the chair and have to tell you how to cut it. They just want to sit in the chair and you know how to go ahead and do it. So it was easy to build up a clientele.

CT: What do they talk about in the chair?

KP: Sometimes I have to stop myself from talking about my world or my experiences. This interview was a big conversation thing to talk to people about. They probably would talk sports with a man barber, but I don't really...my husband says, "Karen you should read the Sports page and get caught up on all the baseball, football...But it would just be artificial [laughing] because I don't know anything about it. [They talk] about things in town that have happened or their families, their kids.

CT: Do politics ever come up?

KP: I don't like to talk about politics. I'll discourage that.

CT: Does it come up in the shop when you've got several people here?

KP: Occasionally it does, but for the most part it's not a primary topic of conversation. It's all fun, laughing and joking around. Like I said, it's mostly about

their family and their kids. Living in town and working in town, my two children go into the schools and [we talk about] their sports teams, soccer games and baseball games.

CT: Do you find that since it is such a small town...Jerry, your hair model today, mentioned that he finds out about the local gossip, it's almost like a diner here. Do you have regulars scheduled around the same time? Or is it random?

KP: It's random. And I love it when all of that comes together and people who haven't seen each other in a long time, or someone recognizes someone that they knew from somewhere else and they're like, "What are you doing here?" That really makes me happy when I see people connect with someone from a past experience.

CT: Would you say you share as much or less than what they're sharing with you?

KP: About my own personal family? I probably share too much [laughing]. My kids will attest to that because my daughter is a waitress/bartender and she will be at work and somebody she doesn't even know will come up to her say, "Oh, your Karen's daughter and know more about her life than she would really care for them to know because I'm talking about it in here [laughing] not ever thinking that this person would see her in public and share that information I've shared. So it's been a little awkward. I think my kids joke about that. My daughter will call her brother and say, "Guess what. Somebody just came up to me and said... because Mom shared it with them."

CT: Can you talk about timing skills and what you really need to excel at to be a barber and how that's different from doing women's hair?

KP: I think it's easier to get into doing men's hair than it is for women's just because it's a simple process, you just have to be friendly and have an eye for lines and precision and be conscientious about your job.

CT: Would you say you are required to be more precise?

KP: As a barber? Yes. I can't explain very clearly what that is but I know there's a lot more texture to a women's hair cut and other things that make a woman's hair look good, but with a man, it's precision, the layering has to be precise so that it flows together. If you have a longer piece next to a shorter piece then that longer piece hides that shorter piece. But with women the way you style your hair...that might work in your favor. It's not that one is more talented than the other [barbers versus hairdressers] I just think that it requires a different skill and a different eye. When you were talking about the woman with five different hairstyles...that was the one thing I was not confident with. A woman walking in and sitting in my chair and saying, "What do you think would look good on my face? Or what kind of hairstyle...?" I could never see that artistically. I could not pick that out, but with a man I could definitely tell him what's going to be functional and what's not going to be functional.

CT: It's kind of like artwork, the difference between creating the sculpture and coming up with idea of the sculpture.

KP: Yeah. I joke with my customers all the time. I'll finish their haircut, I'll blow dry the hair and I'll let them go and some of them will pick up a comb, and part it and comb it. I just brush them off and say, "I'm the framer. I'm not the finished carpenter, I just framed it for you so you can finish it off [laughing]." That's always been a line I've used with my customers.

CT: How much schooling did you complete?

KP: High school and I finished one year of college, the hairdressing school and then the barbering school.

CT: Most people assume that hairdressing is not a financially rewarding career. What are your feelings about that?

KP: I've been pretty happy with the amount of money that I can make doing this. When I was a hairdresser I really wanted to get into a progressive salon, like something on Newbury St [in Boston], or in Danvers, Mass [Massachusetts] there were a couple of hairdressing shops that were really progressive and modern styles back in the late '70s. I just didn't have the personality to fit in there. I could have done the precision haircutting and really been good at the cutting part of it and the amount of money that they get for a haircut compared to my eighteen dollars for my haircut. It just doesn't seem fair sometimes. Some women are paying sixty to eighty dollars to get their hair cut. I could do that, I have the knowledge to be able to cut that hair but I'm not in that atmosphere. In order to do that I had to dress a certain way, and wear the make-up and you can see there's nothing on here [pointing to her face]. I never have been like that. I am mixing a little gold [hair color] in with my silver now [laughing] to offset that a little, but at the time I just couldn't fit the mold of what I needed to be in that salon. So that was probably why I ended up going toward the barbering.

CT: I would assume that you have a higher turnover. Is that true?

KP: Yes, yes.

CT: So that woman who spends one hundred to two hundred dollars and she's there for three or four hours, so I'm not sure if it averages out or not?

KP: I do think they probably earn more because the cost of women's beauty has just escalated. I can't do that many haircuts in the same amount of time to equal that, nor do I want to. Also, I don't have the cost of the product.

CT: Do you spend any money on marketing?

KP: No, I don't. My location does lend itself to word of mouth so I don't really have to at all. I support local town [events] I put my business card on programs for sports for football or baseball and sponsor teams, you buy their T-shirt and their hat and it has your name on it, but other than that, no.

[She gives me a beer cozy that she had made with her business logo on it].

CT: Has your business changed at all with the downturn in the economy?

KP: Maybe a little bit. I find that my customer might let their hair go another week, which over a fifty-two week period of time they may have one less [appointment] per year. Or people might try and buy a set of clippers and do their hair or they let their kids go a little longer. It's not as important that they look as sharp. But for the most part if you're unemployed, you need to look right for those job interviews, so I find that people are still coming in.

CT: What if any part of your body is affected by the physical labor of the job?

KP: Boy [laughing]. I have arthritis in my thumbs.

CT: And that's connected to doing hair?

KP: Yeah, I think it is. You're constantly moving scissors and your clippers are constantly in motion. You're picking hair up and cutting so your hands, I think, take the biggest abuse. I had a carpal tunnel surgery on my right hand, my left hand they said would probably need it eventually but I've been managing to wear a brace at night and rest it that way. There are varicose veins in your legs. I always wear support hose for that. And you have to have good shoes. But I've been very lucky. I'm pretty adamant about trying to keep my weight down and go and do a lot of physical exercise to stay in shape and keep myself healthy. The more weight you put on your body, the more wear and tear you put on your joints. I'm doing pretty good for fifty-six, considering I've been on my feet...I was waitressing and doing everything else before that.

CT: How was waitressing different? Did you not like it?

KP: Yeah, I didn't like waitressing, because you're always working when everyone else is playing. I never liked working weekends or nights. Yeah, and I wasn't good at it. I really wasn't. I will be the first to admit that. I tried bartending down in Middleton and the guy actually fired me. And I cut everybody's hair in the restaurant. He said, "Karen you're a great hair cutter but you really suck at bartending." [laughing] And I think it was because I wanted to stand there and talk to those people for fifteen or twenty minutes and the rest of them can just wait.

CT: I think it's better to know what you're good at.

KP: Yeah. I think so too.

CT: Because the assumption is that anybody can wait tables and it's not true.

KP: Yeah.

CT: I want to talk a little about the industry of barbershops because in the last twenty years there was a while where they were closing down and it seemed like the men who were going to those shops were scrambling, wondering where they are going to go because they weren't comfortable, like you said earlier, in the traditional beauty salon. I've seen in smaller towns...I saw a place called, "Sports Cuts" they had a placard outside that said, "Come Visit Our Man Cave." It was marketed heavily towards men who didn't want to go to a beauty salon and didn't have a barbershop anymore in that town. Do you still have that barbershop down the street?

KP: Yes.

CT: This is the first time I've seen two within a block so it seems like here it's not really happening here but on a larger scale do you know why it appears that barbershops are no longer really needed? I know that now they are coming back as sort of a nostalgic, fun, hipster experience.

KP: Right. I think the barber trade always had a problem trying to market themselves. I think they just considered themselves as a necessity, like a laundromat and a convenient store. It was a place that you went and men got their hair cut quite frequently, it was every two or three weeks and now it's more like sometimes they'll go two or three months. I think they didn't keep up with the industry. Hairdressers spend a fortune on cosmetology classes and conferences and education. And a lot of it is the product company marketing their products. They get you all into coming to these things but at the same time you can pick up a technique or something new that you didn't know that's going to make your job easier or current with the hairstyles. Barbers didn't do that, so I think a lot of them probably lost business and couldn't keep up with their rent or their overhead to maintain keeping the shop. A lot of them probably just got tired and were older and didn't want to play the game anymore. But it is starting to market and trend a little bit towards the fades and line-ups.

CT: What's a line up?

KP: A line up is...you see it a lot on basketball players. They actually go beyond your hairline to make a very straight, precision line of your hairline.

CT: Is it mostly worn by black...

KP: Black, Hispanic.

CT: Can you do that with other textured hair?

KP: You can but it doesn't look the same [laughing]. It doesn't come out the same and there's a lot of people that we joke about them being wannabes [laughing]. They want that hairstyle but again, it's like a woman going in with a picture of a haircut of some actress or something and we can't do that. You don't have the basics to make that happen.

CT: Yeah, it's like the Hallie Berry haircut. So many people went into salons with a picture of her saying they want that, but probably what they really want is to look like Hallie Berry. So what percentage of men would you say come in wanting something that's not...?

KP: Like the line-ups and stuff? I could probably count them on two hands that come in here and ask that because we're not demographically there. I don't have a lot of black...two, three, black guys come in here to get their hair cut and hardly no Hispanic, really.

CT: Any Asian?

KP: I have a couple of Asian, but they too tend to go to Chinatown. There's a Chinese restaurant up the street that I go to and I'll talk to Chin and he did try me just to as a show of mutual support of my business and his and I admit it, I don't



have the technique to make his hair do what he wants it to do. With experience and practice I could get it down but they don't...they just want to go and get their haircut, so.

CT: What's the challenge with Asian hair?

KP: It's very coarse and it doesn't lay flat and somehow projects horizontally out from their head [laughing] more than...

CT: So what do you do to get it to lie straight?

KP: I think razoring would probably work better than my techniques with scissors or clippers because it just kind of slices it. I have never watched an Asian barber do his trade so I can't answer that I guess.

CT: Can you talk about the issue of men who are balding? For example the men who want to keep the comb-over and can't let it go.

KP: I discourage the comb-over. My thing is to have the least amount of maintenance you need to perform on a daily basis when you're walking out the door to go to work. It's so obvious with comb-overs what's happening.

CT: Does it go over well?

KP: For the most part, I'll do it for them to a point where they start to see it for themselves. I say to them, "If you have a bald head and a flat stomach you've got a whole lot more going for you than someone that has a full head of hair and a gut out to here." It is what it is and I think sometimes bald men look even more handsome than with hair, so I try to go in that direction with them.

CT: You try to support them.

KP: Yeah

CT: What's the most old-fashioned technique that you do here?

KP: Probably the straight razor and shave.

CT: And that's on the back of the neck. Do you do full shaves?

KP: I do full shaves on faces.

CT: And how often do men ask for that?

KP: It's kind of a spa treatment, in their minds, for themselves. We probably do thirty to fifty a year.

CT: You do the hot towels?

KP: Yeah, the steam towels and then the cold towels. It's fun. I love to do it. It's nice to make somebody relax like that. A lot of times if their son is getting married, or they are getting married or if it's a special occasion, they'll ask for an appointment to have that done.

CT: Are there any newer techniques that have come about in the last ten years?

KP: No, it's all basic...

CT: How many women come in here, if any, to get their hair done?

KP: We get quite a few women. I'd say it's probably ten percent of our clientele, maybe fifteen percent come in, a lot of little girls. Mom or dad doesn't want to go and spend the price of a hairdressing shop to have just a one length straight cut. Again, the precision we can give to that is what they're looking for. They just want to be able to put it in a ponytail and keep it out of their face. So a hairdresser might want to get creative with the haircut and put layers in it and may end up being unmanageable. I have actually just started to pick up this housing unit where there's elderly people there and I cut a couple of women's hair and word is traveling [laughing] so they're all coming in saying, "Can I get an appointment with Karen?" Or they'll let someone come in and cut their hair but again, they're on fixed incomes and they don't want to go and spend an exorbitant amount of money on a hairstyle that they're not even happy with. They walk out because it's too fancy for them. Their hair is gray and they just want something that is going to be off their neck and not messy. So we provide that for them too. I have a lot of elderly husbands who will come in and say, "Do you cut women's hair?" And that was how it started. I would say, "Yeah, send your wife in. I would love to cut her hair."

CT: Since you look at a lot scalps, do you see suspicious moles?

KP: Yeah.

CT: And how do you handle that?

KP: I've had a couple of customers, with the sun exposure that they've had mostly have created pre-cancerous spots on their ears, or their nose or the back of their neck and I've sent them to go to their doctor to have them take a look. And I had a customer come in and I saved him from having a real serious melanoma. It's nice. It makes me feel good that I can point that out to them because they don't look that closely in the mirror at themselves.

CT: They would never really see the back of their ears. It's a vantage point that you have.

KP: Yep definitely. That's actually been a good thing to do for people over the years.

CT: I just have a few more basic questions. Do you have health insurance?

KP: I'm covered with health insurance through my husband's work. But at one time neither he nor I had it and I had to pay out of pocket. It's a mortgage payment. It just kept going up. At one point I opened up a savings account and put x amount of dollars into that every week and it just had to keep growing and growing. I don't want to get into anything political but health care is huge in my list of frustrating things, for people that are self-employed.

CT: It's a dysfunctional system.

KP: Yes, very.

CT: And you have kids.

KP: Yeah, but fortunately now my husband's company is covering us but still even that keeps changing. Our co-pays and deductibles have risen over the past couple of years. You get to a point at my age, I don't go to the doctor as readily as I did in the past because I'm not sure I want to incur that co-pay for them to tell me that it's something minor that I could have diagnosed myself and treated with something over the counter. But you never know. You're taking that risk of not having something checked out.

CT: It's a catch-22 because I go and then they tell me I have something really scary and then they do all these tests and then it's fine. Yeah, it's complicated. But I just wondered as a business owner, if you had insurance.

KP: No, and I would love to offer that to employees and it's just not financially feasible.

CT: I understand. What are your plans for retirement?

KP: I don't have any at the moment.

CT: Do you have any savings?

KP: I started a little bit, but it's definitely not going to be enough support me in retirement. So I'm hoping that I can just have other people working here and cut back on my own hours. My husband is in the same boat, we didn't have jobs that had a good pension plan so we've been talking about our house, because it's worth more than we paid for it, so maybe we could sell that and move someplace that wasn't as expensive to live.

CT: Is it expensive to live here?

KP: When I moved here in 1985, my house was \$87,000. And now it's worth about \$300,000 more than that. And it's a modest house, four-room, we did our basement over and made a living space but it's on a little less than an acre of land. Today, I don't think I would be able to afford to move into Georgetown now. It's sad because my kids can't...my son bought a condo in North Andover for \$180,000, but it's not a house and now he has a baby, a little boy and wants to see him go out and play in the yard and ride his bike around.

CT: I think that's it. Is there anything I didn't cover that you wanted to talk about?

KP: No, I don't think so.

CT: It was a great interview.

KP: I'm glad you included me and made the effort to come out here.

[END]